



America's Bipartisan Political Class

DC residents think we're the dim bulbs.

By Doug Bandow

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America is a class-based society. But based on politics, not economics. An elite political class runs the state to their benefit. The rest of us pay the bill.

The differences between the assumptions and values of people within and without Washington's 68 square miles of fantasy long have been on ostentatious public display. For example, for years Congress routinely exempted itself from rules imposed on everyone else. The Republican-controlled Congress in 1994 theoretically stopped that.

However, legislative privilege never really ended. The Democrats' health care "reform" became the latest example of elite privilege. Never mind the endless rules exemptions and multiple deadline postponements. Most dramatic was the tender treatment of those in the capital who approved the measure despite being opposed by those outside the capital.

Critics of Obamacare successfully pushed an amendment requiring congressmen and congressional staffers to purchase their health insurance through the new government exchanges. Being tossed from their special plans meant the end of federal subsidies, which run \$5,000 annually for individuals and \$11,000 for families.

There was no principled reason to treat the congressional plan differently than corporate policies, which avoided the exchanges. However, the new rule was meant to diffuse anger from tens of millions of Americans who were forced to change plans and pay more for health care coverage.

No surprise, residents of Capitol Hill were not happy and complained about their imminent loss. Alas, it wouldn't look good for Congress to enact a special exemption. Imagine explaining that to the voters! So the administration stepped in to help. Without any legal authority President Barack Obama offered to maintain existing federal contributions.

Legislators were pleased. Rep. Chris Stewart (R-Utah) observed: "There's no question it was the right thing to do. Not just for me, but for my staff. Heavens, I have staff who don't make much money. This would be a really big bite for them."

Which differs from tens of millions of other Americans precisely how? Too bad the president won't step in to ensure that the rest of us won't have to suffer "a really big bite" from Obamacare.

It is no surprise that Democrats who supported the legislation also backed this sub rosa subsidy. But Republicans, who unanimously opposed the legislation, supported the illegal “fix” as well.

That seems strange, since the GOP pushed other, substantive revisions, and opposed special interest subsidies. In fact, Republicans would win political points even if a repeal amendment failed since the fight would paint the Democrats as the party of privilege. Charge leading Democrats with ramming through unpopular “reforms” and then exempting themselves from the higher cost. So the GOP should be planning its attack ads in order to cement control of the House and win control of the Senate.

However, noted my Cato Institute colleague Michael Cannon: “it appears the National Republican Senatorial Committee and the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee have negotiated a truce on this issue. If true, both parties have agreed *not* to give voice to the will of the people by attacking members of the other party who consent to this special privilege granted to members of Congress.” Apparently soaking the taxpayers is more important than winning additional seats in Congress.

A similar difference in perspective afflicts foreign policy. Polls long have demonstrated that elites believe in sending average people off in constant wars, invasions, and occupations. In contrast, average people, who actually fight in these conflicts, are less enthused about being sent off to do endless battle.

Syria is the latest example. Secretary of State John Kerry, a veteran who opposed the Vietnam War, has turned into a global crusader. He was joined by Iraq war critic Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and, most important, Nobel Peace Prize winner Barack Obama. The incessantly bombastic uber-hawks, John McCain and Lindsey Graham, were even more insistent. Most of the senior congressional leadership, including the Republican House Speaker and Majority Leader, and the vast majority of political pundits also backed jumping into Syria’s civil war. Those who failed to discern the urgency of warring against yet another Muslim nation were denounced as “isolationists.”

Normally the public is simply ignored. However, this time the president tossed the decision to Congress, inviting common citizens to voice their opinion. Opposition erupted. The more officials explained their confused and contradictory plans, the more the American people opposed intervening. As average Americans unexpectedly joined the foreign policy debate, most legislators quickly arrayed themselves against the administration. About the only lawmakers who stood firm were McCain and Graham, who want to bomb most every nation, irrespective of relevance to U.S. security. Only the Russian diplomatic gambit saved President Obama from a devastating political defeat.

Yet some elites, such as Sen. McCain, perhaps the Senate’s most hawkish member, then said that the president should go ahead and bomb even without congressional authorization. Why should the Constitution, people’s elected representatives, or general public opinion matter? Some people, like those who populate Washington, are to rule. The rest are to be ruled and obey without question.

Finally, there is the common incandescent light bulb, which disappeared into history on January 1. Thank America’s bipartisan paternalistic elite.

Light-emitting diodes, or LEDs, are more efficient than incandescents, so George W. Bush and the Democratic Congress joined together to ban the latter. Obviously average people could shift if they wanted, but, tragically, most are shockingly myopic, even stupid. They just are not interested in spending \$20 or \$30 on a bulb that is slow to light, gives off a dull glow, and creates a mercury-laced

toxic waste dump if broken. So Congress banned the time-tested favorite in the name of protecting the people from themselves.

Alas, the public was not interested in the “protection” offered by Washington — actually directed more at subsidizing lighting companies which would move forward with new LEDs only if government banned the competition. So many people stocked up on the disappearing incandescent bulbs, which were sold off at distress prices as January 1 loomed. Indeed, my basement is filled with a lifetime supply.

The wide gap between the political and working classes is not an argument for a populist democracy, but a constitutional republic in which government’s power is limited and individual liberties are protected. There always will be elites, and they always will enjoy disproportionate influence. However, their ability to rule over the less privileged should be limited.

Indeed, in this way legal limitations and property rights are most beneficial for those at the bottom of society. Without such protections, influential and wealthy elites usually get their way, gaining both power and money. They find ways to protect their gains, whether fair or foul. Everyone else is left to fend for themselves. Constitutional and legal protections help even the odds.

Inequality is inevitable in any free society. However, the rule of law can limit political inequality. The starting point should be to make those in government to live by the same laws as the rest of us.